

---

## HOBBS'S CONCEPTION OF MORALITY

Author(s): Howard Warrender

Source: *Rivista Critica di Storia della Filosofia*, OTTOBRE-DICEMBRE 1962, Vol. 17, No. 4 (OTTOBRE-DICEMBRE 1962), pp. 434-449

Published by: FrancoAngeli srl

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44021575>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Rivista Critica di Storia della Filosofia*

## HOBBS'S CONCEPTION OF MORALITY

It is often held that Hobbes's political doctrine is ultimately an assertion that might is right or that power justifies itself. The view will be taken below that such an assessment is fundamentally inadequate; that, on the contrary, Hobbes's political theory is grounded upon a number of prescriptive principles; and further, that these were thought by Hobbes to form a system of morality, as he conceived the nature of morality to be. Hobbes's principles, it is true, present some unusual and debatable features and they are not easily classified in the categories we commonly use. We shall, nevertheless, conclude that they are in fact most appropriately regarded as constituting a system of morality, though a specialized system related to a concept of 'political man'<sup>1</sup>.

### I

Hobbes portrays the power and terror of Leviathan in striking metaphors, but what really emerges from his doctrine is the inherent weakness of the sovereign. Men are not naturally altruistic and are equal in power as far as the study of politics is implicated in that each man can readily kill or be killed by any man, including, of course, the sovereign as a natural person or group of persons. Political power is essentially a capacity to move the will of other people to produce desired results, and it is part of men's natural dilemma that such power is tragically insufficient and unstable.

Hobbes saw very clearly that the actual existence of a political power adequate to control men's natural tendencies to conflict and destruction depended upon some choice or consent on the part of a critical number

---

<sup>1</sup> In the early part of this paper I have summarized a number of arguments made at greater length in my book, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, Oxford 1957, and unless otherwise indicated, references are to this volume. With regard to my treatment of Hobbes's doctrine in this book, I have been taken to task for suggesting that it contains a form of moral obligation. In fact, this assertion was not made; I simply stated that the account given is what stands for morality in Hobbes, and was content to try to expound the propositions Hobbes puts forward. The present paper, however, is not restricted to exposition and does go further in claiming that Hobbes's philosophy contains a type of moral theory, though perhaps a moral theory of an unusual kind.

of citizens, who would be prepared to create and sustain this power quite apart from any sanction it could use against them, for unless there were such a body of citizens the sovereign would be powerless and could effect no punishments. Even the most absolute dictator must rely upon some of his subjects who will feel in some sense that they ought to obey him. As Hobbes remarks:

«... For if men know not their duty, what is there that can force them to obey the laws? An army, you will say. But what shall force the army? Were not the trained bands an army? Were they not the janissaries, that not very long ago slew Osman in his own palace at Constantinople?»<sup>2</sup>.

The existence of the state, therefore, requires that for some citizens a meaning must be capable of being given to the proposition that they ought to obey the sovereign. Thus Hobbes is a moralist at least in this sense.

If we turn from the question of the power of the sovereign to that of his authority, we find that Hobbes deals with the problem along similar lines. The source of the sovereign's authority in Hobbes's doctrine is sometimes misinterpreted, it is true, because Hobbes contends that when the sovereign loses the *power* to defend the subject, he also loses his *right* to the subject's obedience. This position is a consequence of the inalienable right of the individual to defend himself in extremity — a special problem which we shall need to consider below. Nevertheless, the right to obedience is not gained in the same way as it is lost. The sovereign is an authority for the subject because in concluding a political covenant the subject has «authorized» his actions. Leaving aside the special case of the power of God, Hobbes never allows that superior power as such establishes a right of obedience. All he says about sovereignty by conquest bears out this view.

«It is not therefore the victory, that giveth the right of dominion over the vanquished, but his own covenant. Nor is he obliged because he is conquered; ... but because he cometh in, and submitteth to the victor; ...»<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, it is not because the victim is overcome by *superior* force that he is obliged, but because he has covenanted his submission, and a man kept in chains is not obliged to his captor but only if he is trusted. Elsewhere, on many occasions, Hobbes draws a distinction between a legitimate sovereign and a usurper, between having the supreme power in society and having the right to govern. For power only becomes authority where it is authorized by the subject, and a wielder of power who is not authorized is described by Hobbes as an «enemy».

<sup>2</sup> *Behemoth*, E. W., vol. 6, p. 237. See also *ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> *Leviathan*, E. W., vol. 3, p. 189; see also Warrender, pp. 122 ff.

Hobbes's treatment of the case of the successful rebel is complicated, it is true, but it is consistent with this interpretation. Rebellion is always a sin, even successful rebellion, that is, even when the rebel turns out to have been more powerful than the sovereign. Nevertheless, when the rebel has succeeded in establishing himself, it is not necessarily a *new* sin on his part to govern, and the citizen who has authorized him will have a duty to obey the new sovereign to whom he now owes his protection. As in any conquest, however, this acquisition of authority derives, not from the power of the rebel nor from his victory, but from the covenant of submission made by the subject, and it is an authority which extends only over those who have made such a covenant. In the context of the power of men, therefore, there is always a difference in Hobbes's doctrine between power and authority, or between might and right.

Thus, political authority and the existence of political power depend alike in Hobbes's doctrine upon an act of consent, or some covenant or bargain in which an element of trust is involved, on the part of the citizen or a critical number of them. What Hobbes does of course is to refuse to evaluate the motives behind consent. Rejecting the free-will argument, he regards the will as determined by the appetites and aversions of the agent, as they play upon his particular problem and circumstance. To be free, in his view, is simply to be able to act according to the will whatever the relevant appetites and aversions may be, but outside this context freedom has no meaning. We only choose, and do not choose to choose or will to will. Thus, if the individual promises to obey in order to avoid prospective death, this is a voluntary choice and his covenant obliges, just as it would if the alternatives open to him had been more agreeable. Sovereignty by conquest has the same moral consequences as sovereignty by institution, for in both cases the will of the subject decides the issue. If it is objected that there is little difference between being frightened into jumping and being pushed, Hobbes would answer that there is the significant difference that one is a voluntary action whereas the other is not, and that morality for him is based upon this distinction.

## II

Hobbes is basically a natural law philosopher. The centre of his system is a pervasive obligation upon the individual to obey natural law both in the state of nature and in civil society, and without this his theory contains no argument. The laws of nature in Hobbes's doctrine are a number of rational principles, known to all men of right reason and applicable to men whatever the state in which they live or their religion. These principles are 'seek peace', 'give up your rights to govern yourself if others will do the same', 'keep your covenants', 'avoid insult and arrogance', etc., and all fall under the general rubric

'do as you would be done by'. Hobbes innovated, it is true, in that his natural laws are formal in character or, as they have been described, are natural laws with a minimum content. They are derived from certain empirical assumptions about the nature of man<sup>4</sup> — his endless seeking for the satisfaction of his own desires, his limited altruism, the natural saturation of power and equality of fear between men, their vulnerability, etc. Nevertheless, they apply to all men<sup>5</sup>.

Through the medium of a political covenant (whether sovereignty is instituted or whether it is established by conquest) the citizen takes upon himself an obligation to obey the sovereign, which is underwritten by his fundamental obligation to obey natural law — in the first place, from an indeterminate obligation to 'seek peace' etc., and in the second place, from a more specific obligation to keep the valid covenants which he makes. The power of the sovereign is therefore the reluctance of the subject to break natural law.

This position in Hobbes's doctrine, however, is overlaid by a number of qualifications and conditions. While these do not alter the essential argument, they do tend to obscure it and require consideration.

a) THE NATURAL RIGHT TO SELF-DEFENCE AND VALIDATING CONDITIONS OF OBLIGATION.

Hobbes gives the impression sometimes that the state of nature is devoid of moral principles, and that morality is created in a fundamental way by the sovereign and by the civil law enforced by his sanctions. On closer examination, however, this impression turns out to be misleading.

The individual, according to Hobbes's theory, has a natural right to preserve his own life in extremity — a right which he can never abandon, neither in the state of nature nor in civil society and this basic right serves as a limitation or qualification upon obligations that would otherwise be operative. Hobbes's argument on this point is complicated but its main effect can be summarised by the statement that the individual is freed from obligation by a bona fide plea of self-defence.

With regard to the state of nature, Hobbes maintains that the laws of nature oblige in conscience always<sup>6</sup>, but that they oblige the individual to act according to their dictates only where there is security.

---

<sup>4</sup> This statement is amplified and qualified below, when we consider Hobbes's concept of 'political man'.

<sup>5</sup> Though the laws of nature, in Hobbes's account, support the authority of the sovereign, unlike some versions of natural law they do not limit the sovereign's actions in a manner which can be supervised by the body of citizens. Hobbes does maintain that the sovereign has duties under natural law which he owes to God, but these cannot be interpreted and enforced against him by the citizen.

<sup>6</sup> See sub-title *Leviathan*, E. W., vol. 3, p. 145.

This statement is elaborated in an important passage of the *Leviathan* as follows:

«The laws of nature oblige *in foro interno*; that is to say, they bind to a desire they should take place: but *in foro externo*; that is, to the putting them in act, not always. For he that should be modest, and tractable, and perform all he promises, in such time, and place, where no man else should do so, should but make himself a prey to others, and procure his own certain ruin, contrary to the ground of all laws of nature, which tend to nature's preservation. And again, he that having sufficient security, that others shall observe the same laws towards him, observes them not himself, seeketh not peace, but war; and consequently the destruction of his nature by violence»<sup>7</sup>.

Hobbes's explanation of his position in his various writings appears to be as follows. We have always a duty to maintain a favourable disposition towards obedience of the laws of nature. This presumably covers an intention to secure peace where this is practicable, and presumably a readiness to support any scheme that will ensure an observance of peace all round. Elsewhere, Hobbes says that we have always an obligation to «endeavour» peace<sup>8</sup>. Thus, the first law of nature which bids men seek peace is unconditional, for merely to seek peace does not add to our danger.

Beyond this point, however, the duty to act in accordance with the laws of nature (in *foro externo*) is conditional upon security. It should be noted, however, that Hobbes does not claim that the laws of nature do not oblige *in foro externo*, but that they do not *always* oblige in this way. He expands this statement by indicating that the individual is obliged to perform the external acts prescribed by the laws where he has sufficient security against other men, but where it can happen that performance of the law will put him into mortal danger, the obligation may not stand. The problem of the state of nature is not that no actions can be obligatory; but that the actions that tend to his preservation must be left to the bona fide estimate of each man, and there is no way in which any specific action can be ruled out in general. As Hobbes claims, there is nothing a man may not find a help to him or that may not be reasonable in terms of his own fears and estimate of the position. But the possibility of a good excuse for neglecting natural law does not mean that all actions are excused. Moreover, Hobbes suggests that there may be some peaceful actions (avoiding gratuitous provocation and insult) which can always

---

<sup>7</sup> *Leviathan*, E. W., vol. 3, p. 145. See also *De Cive*, E. W., vol. 2, pp. 45-46; L. W., vol. 2, pp. 194-5; *De Corpore Politico*, E. W., vol. 4, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> The term «endeavour» seems to be related to Hobbes's theory of physics, where it is used to describe the preliminary motions that tend to something. And so, this is not simply a duty to intend peace, but to act in that direction however tentatively.

be performed. The matter must simply be left to the individual conscience and to God <sup>9</sup>.

In a similar manner, when Hobbes deals with covenants in the state of nature, he does not maintain that all such covenants are necessarily void. Some, he claims, must stand as where one party has already performed his share of the bargain. In general, however, covenants in the state of nature can become void through some event *subsequent* to their contraction, such that one party has a reasonable suspicion of non-performance by the other party <sup>10</sup>. But here again a bona fide estimate is involved for each man. The state of nature, therefore, is not a moral vacuum; it is a condition where obligations to obey natural law and hence to keep covenants may be rightfully suspended through bona fide judgements of insecurity <sup>11</sup>.

In civil society, the apparatus of the civil law sustained by the sanctions of the sovereign normally takes away the excuse of reasonable fear where the protection of the law may safely be awaited. But there are the limiting cases. In the face of a direct attack upon his life or where the sovereign has clearly lost the power to protect him, the citizen may take what action he considers best to secure himself.

As between the state of nature and civil society, the principle is always the same. The individual has always a duty to seek peace but is never required to be a pacifist. Different circumstances will make different actions possible under this rule. This does not, however, hinder that in a given situation we may know perfectly clearly the difference between endeavouring peace and failing to do so, and this duty is the basis of Hobbes's political system.

Now power is implicated in morality here for Hobbes — not because power creates morality, but because in the form of the sanctions exercised by the sovereign behind the civil law, it creates security; and security in turn affects the application of moral principles as they bear upon the individual citizen in the circumstances confronting him <sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> See Warrender, Ch. IV.

<sup>10</sup> It is sometimes argued against Hobbes, 'If covenants in the state of nature are void, how can men institute a sovereign by valid covenant'. As noted above, Hobbes's doctrine is not that *all* covenants in the state of nature are void, but that valid covenants may be invalidated by an event *subsequent* to their contraction such as to give reasonable suspicion of non-performance by the other party. The political covenant establishing the sovereign has the characteristic that it brings into being a power sufficient to take away the excuse of reasonable suspicion from events *subsequent* to it, owing to the capacity of the sovereign to enforce it against recalcitrant citizens.

<sup>11</sup> See Warrender, Ch. III.

<sup>12</sup> See Warrender, Chs. V-VII.



b) THE ROLE OF THE SOVEREIGN IN PRESCRIBING FOR THE CITIZEN RULES OF MORALITY AND RELIGIOUS DOCTRINES.

Hobbes maintained that men differ in what they call good and evil; each man calls that good which pleases him for the present, and that evil for which he has an aversion. There is no rule regarding good and evil to be found from the objects themselves. In spite of this diversity and subjectivity in men's value judgements, however, there is one point upon which all men agree; to each man his own preservation is good, and his own destruction evil. This is true, not simply because life in itself is good, but because in order to secure most things that men regard<sup>1</sup> as desirable, it is first necessary that they should survive.

In civil society, Hobbes gives to the sovereign the right to determine, through the civil law, a system of morality, and to prescribe the religious doctrines which the citizen is to take as authentic. It is to be noted, however, that even in civil society, this does not exhaust the whole field of morality. In the inner realm of conscience the individual is still accountable to himself, and Hobbes insists that all that concerns the sovereign are the words and deeds of his subjects — not their thoughts. Likewise, though the sovereign may for public purposes prescribe the religious doctrines which are to be professed by the citizen, Hobbes is careful to point out that ultimate salvation depends upon inner belief and this is a matter of God's grace and cannot be commanded. The prescriptions of the sovereign, therefore, replace within a certain field of public action, any competing accounts of morality or true religion. This is allowed by Hobbes, not because the sovereign is particularly wise or perceptive in his judgements, but because the diversity of men's views on these matters requires a public settlement and the sovereign's verdict is the settlement consistent with order.

Nevertheless, the sovereign does not create morality in any fundamental sense. The basic obligation of the citizen to obey the sovereign cannot itself be created by the sovereign's fiat. As Hobbes makes clear, the obligation to keep the political covenant is prior to anything the sovereign decrees; otherwise there would be no need to take notice of what the sovereign had ordered, including of course his views on morality or religion.

«... For a civil law, that shall forbid rebellion, (and such is all resistance to the essential rights of the sovereignty), is not, as a civil law, any obligation, but by virtue only of the law of nature, that forbiddeth the violation of faith; which natural obligation, if men know not, they cannot know the right of any law the sovereign maketh. And for the punishment, they take it but for an act of hostility; which when they think they have strength enough, they will endeavour by acts of hostility, to avoid »<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> *Leviathan*, E. W., vol. 3, pp. 323-4.



The same point is made in a passage from *De Cive*.

« But that sin, which by the law of nature is treason, is a transgression of the natural, not the civil law... But if some sovereign prince should set forth a law on this manner, *thou shalt not rebel*, he would effect just nothing. For except subjects were before obliged to obedience, that is to say, not to rebel, all law is of no force... »<sup>14</sup>.

This basic obligation to obey the sovereign rests for each individual upon a private sphere of morality — an obligation to obey natural law as interpreted by himself. It is this private sphere of morality which determines also the point at which the citizen may leave the state without a breach of duty. He is entitled to withhold his obedience when the sovereign no longer has the power to protect him, and such a decision can only be taken in the end by the individual himself in terms of his own bona fide estimate of the situation. This Hobbes acknowledges. Again, men are agreed that their own preservation is good, and that violent death is evil and this does not depend in any way upon the opinion of the sovereign. There are, therefore, two spheres of morality, an inner shell determined by the sovereign for public purposes; and an outer shell interpreted by each man for himself which provides his duty to the public morality that the sovereign has established and prescribes the limits of that duty. It is this outer shell that is prior to and independent of the civil sovereign that carries Hobbes's political theory<sup>15</sup>.

#### c) THE PLACE OF GOD IN HOBBS'S DOCTRINE.

Upon his system of natural law Hobbes erected a superstructure, introducing the role of God, and his rewards and punishments. Hobbes speaks sometimes as though the laws of nature are obligatory simply because they are the commands of God; sometimes as though these laws oblige men in virtue of the divine sanctions which will be visited upon men in a future life according to their observance of them. Although it seems likely that Hobbes himself took this superstructure seriously, it is possible to eliminate it completely from his theory and to start simply from natural law without losing anything essential. Nevertheless, it tends to give a false picture of Hobbes's doctrine in two main respects, namely, the relationship between power and morality in general, and the relationship between morality and expediency.

There is an analogy in Hobbes's writings, though I think a very deceptive one, between the power of God and the power of men, and although Hobbes suggests this analogy on occasion, he does not follow

<sup>14</sup> *De Cive*, E. W., vol. 2, pp. 200-1. See also *ibid.*, p. 190; L. W., vol. 2, pp. 328-9.

<sup>15</sup> See Warrender, Ch. VII.

it in constructing his theory. Obligation, on his view, in so far as it is connected with power, appears to be connected to a sanction that is *always* sufficient if it is clearly apprehended; that is to say, to a sanction that would operate upon the same individual permanently and also on other men given due knowledge and reflection. Since only God exercises such a sanction, it follows that the only power which can produce obligation is God's power and never the power of men<sup>16</sup>. And so, all duties follow from God's power and his commands (natural law)<sup>17</sup>. The case where a person exercises at a given time, a sanction over another person that is adequate to compel obedience, we may distinguish from obligation simply by saying that the victim is in the *power* of his adversary. But the position where one man has another in his power is impermanent over time — the conqueror may sleep or turn his back; it does not necessarily hold over other parties, and requires something extra to produce permanence. It appears that Hobbes did not think that the state could be constructed and sustained simply upon some attempt to produce this relationship in a generalized form. Thus in the matter of political obligation, Hobbes has to argue further that the citizen has a *duty* or is *obliged* to obey.

According to Hobbes's doctrine, God governs the world in three ways: *a*) a governance of all that exists, by rules of the kind studied in natural science — this is not of present interest; *b*) a Natural Kingdom, in which God governs all men, Christian and infidel, by rational principles of conduct (natural law) — this is the only kingdom strictly relevant to Hobbes's political philosophy; *c*) a Prophetic Kingdom, in which God governed in a more personal way in certain biblical epochs, by positive law and revelation.

Now the true analogy between the power of men and the power of God lies only within the prophetic and not the natural kingdom. In his prophetic kingdom, on the one hand, God was regarded as governing the Jews during some periods in a special and personal manner, issuing commands and administering direct punishments. It is only in such a context as this, however, which is no longer relevant for practical purposes, that the power of God can govern men, without the need of a supplementary civil sovereign, and can be compared in any way with the power of men.

In the natural kingdom of God, on the other hand, government is exercised entirely through a body of rational principles, the laws of nature, and a civil sovereign instituted or sustained from them. The power of

---

<sup>16</sup> Hobbes never says that *superior* force creates an obligation. What he does say, for example, is «power *irresistible* justifies all actions... *less power* does not» (my italics). Since God is in fact the only irresistible power it follows that obligation derives from the power of God (however that is to be further interpreted), and never from the power of men. See also Hobbes's statements on sovereignty by conquest, noted above.

<sup>17</sup> Warrender, pp. 287 ff.

God, in this case, has nothing to do except to provide some kind of authority for these rational principles, and to expect more is quite meaningless. This is the system of authority that is based upon rational knowledge, and the limitations of reason set its boundaries. Reason tells us the laws of nature, but very little more than this except perhaps the necessity of some hypothesis to account for their status. This hypothesis can be filled in by the individual according to his beliefs and religion, Christian or otherwise, provided only that it supports the propositions of natural law; or one may prefer to start simply from a natural law which bears its own authority. In either case it cannot be used as an argument that power as exercised by men can create obligation.

In a similar way the rewards and punishments of God may be regarded by the individual as making his duty to obey natural law ultimately into a form of self-interest. But we have no rational knowledge in this field and from the point of view of the rational system of authority, these explanations may be regarded as a myth, in that they are more important for what they do than for what they are. In some other context these beliefs may have a life of their own, but here their essence is to serve a function, that of supporting natural law, though they add nothing to its content. If we confine ourselves to Hobbes's rational system of authority such factors can be introduced only as a formal answer<sup>18</sup>.

### III

It is agreed that obedience to the laws of nature in general is in the ordinary self-interest of men in general — that is to say it is in their interest taking account of mundane factors operative in this life and quite apart from any divine sanctions administered in a future existence. Purely on the level of ordinary self-interest, however, a discrepancy can arise between the general interest and that of the individual. The individual can sometimes gain by rebellion, as many have done in the past. Now, where ordinary self-interest breaks down, Hobbes argues further that the citizen has a *duty* to obey natural law and hence the sovereign up to the point of directly endangering his own life. Thus he may rebel to save his own life, but not to save the lives of other people and not simply for his own gain.

If we attempt to re-interpret the word *duty* here, Hobbes's doctrine leaves room for some conjecture. One possibility is to give an interpretation in terms of God's rewards and punishments in an after-life. Then, where ordinary self-interest breaks down, the individual must still obey

---

<sup>18</sup> For an expansion of the arguments in this section, see Warrender 'The Place of God in Hobbes's Philosophy', *Political Studies*, vol. VIII, Feb. 1960. Also Warrender, Chs. XIII-XIV.

natural law because divine sanctions will make it still in his interest to do so. This appears to bring Hobbes's system back ultimately to a kind of prudence or expediency. In this connexion, however, as remarked above, we have no rational knowledge of divine sanctions or an after-life, and these can be introduced only as a formal answer. Further, whether we start Hobbes's system from divine punishment or simply from the propositions of natural law, it is radically different from ordinary expediency that takes account only of mundane sanctions, and it gives a different limit to political obligation.

The laws of nature in Hobbes's doctrine are not strictly rules for personal self-preservation. Personal self-preservation in Hobbes's account is not a *duty*, but a *right*; personal self-preservation is not what makes actions obligatory, but what exempts the individual from actions that would otherwise be obligatory. The laws of nature (seek peace, keep covenants, etc.), are rules for the preservation of men in general, whereas the individual may save his life on occasion by the most dubious means<sup>19</sup>. The formula required for the state, therefore, is not 'preserve yourself' (though this is always permissible), but 'act so that all men can be preserved, except where this is inconsistent with your own preservation'. A prescriptive principle of this kind cannot be derived from the ordinary self-interest of the individual alone and this admission is sufficient for our purpose. Hobbes's laws of nature fall under the principle 'do as you would be done by' and have a universality that distinguishes them from a system of expediency. They are, however, based upon a particular conception of human nature, and perhaps the best way to look at them is as a system of morality for a model of 'political man'.

Hobbes's account of human nature runs briefly as follows. Dominated by a restless seeking for satisfaction of their desires, men are engaged in a search that cannot be concluded, as they take more pleasure in prospering than in having prospered. The chief characteristics of men as Hobbes portrays them are, pride, avarice, ambition and fear of death, and in their natural state they must be continuously in conflict. Each man wishes not merely to excel his fellows but also to preserve what he has, and will take preventive measures against others lest he should be caught at a disadvantage on another occasion. Hobbes compares life to a race, in which human emotions are essentially connected to victory or frustration in that race. Each man is the enemy of other men

---

<sup>19</sup> This is *allowed* in bona fide extremity in Hobbes's doctrine; but it is not a duty. C.f. Hobbes's statement that it is '... a precept, or general rule of reason, that every man, ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of war. The first branch of which rule, containeth the first, and fundamental law of nature; which is, to seek peace, and follow it. The second, the sum of the right of nature; which is, by all means we can, to defend ourselves'.

*Leviathan*, E. W., vol. 3, pp. 116-17. See also *De Corpore Politico*, E. W., vol. 4, pp. 222-3.

and they are sufficiently equal in that any man can kill or be killed by another. Fortunately, man's fear of death, though completely self-regarding, is capable of being used to preserve men and provides a motive for the formation of society. Hobbes's theory is essentially the quest for a number of rational principles, which, given the motivation of men, will provide a political power strong enough to control their natural tendency towards destruction.

Man is clearly both more noble and less rational than Hobbes's model — a matter which Hobbes himself freely recognizes. In speaking of magnanimity, he allows that there are some who would scorn to base their lives on fear and he clearly admires such people. But he maintains that they are either too few or that it is too risky to assume that there will be enough of them to sustain the state. Similarly, men may, in a trivial way, throw away their lives out of boastfulness or provocation on a mere insult. Nevertheless, Hobbes thought that he had described the character of man as it is essential for the study of politics.

In order to think about reality, it is necessary to make abstractions and to systematize the field of study. In political ethics, if we are to proceed beyond mere intuitive judgements where we simply do what we think best, some attempt of this kind must be made and one form it can take is to elaborate a concept of 'political man'. This appears to be essentially what Hobbes was doing. Although Hobbes himself was greatly influenced by the model of Euclidian geometry, we see the nature of his enterprise most clearly perhaps by comparing it with the attempts of the classical economists to formulate their concept of economic man and to establish economic theory in its modern form<sup>20</sup>.

Let us look back briefly to the beginning of economic theory, held to start in Britain with the work of Adam Smith. The feature of the economy that struck Smith with great force was the character of the economic exchange, where the individual in exchanging goods may further the interests of others at the same time as his own without specifically intending to do so. He was led to his theory of the world market and his thesis of the Natural Harmony of Interests. This conclusion was no doubt optimistic and superficial, but it was this which caused, almost accidentally perhaps, an alteration in the whole style of economic theory. Smith and the classical economists began to frame their statements of economic policy in a universal form — that is to say, in principles which, correct or not, were intended to be capable of being followed by all men to their mutual benefit. If we compare such principles with those enunciated by the mercantilist economists who preceded them, we see that the mercantilists were concerned with rules by which one party could

---

<sup>20</sup> I have made some reference to this topic in the concluding section of an Inaugural Lecture, delivered before the Queen's University of Belfast on 8<sup>th</sup> March, 1961.

benefit only to the detriment of other parties. In this way mercantilism was concerned with how to *exploit* the economy, whereas Smith and the classical economists had begun the study of how the economy could be *rationalised*, and economics has never since completely lost this core of universal rationalistic advice.

If we now turn to the study of politics, we see the beginnings of something like a similar movement taking place approximately a century before. The Renaissance and Reformation had undermined customary and religious authorities, and men began to look for a new source of advice in political affairs. Machiavelli was, perhaps, the first serious writer to attempt this in terms of an examination of political power. Machiavelli's political writings as a whole contain many reservations and Machiavelli, doubtless, would be able to say that he was not a Machiavellian. Nevertheless, he is essentially concerned with the problem of power on principles which cannot be universalized — with the question of how to *exploit* political power though this may be for good purposes as well as for bad. When we come to the writings of Thomas Hobbes, however, we see the beginnings of the conversion of these principles along the lines already noted with regard to economic theory. Hobbes was concerned with the *rationalisation* of power — with principles to which men could simultaneously agree.

Just as, for Hobbes, the individual may preserve himself by force or fraud, but this is not a part of political theory; so for the economists, the individual may acquire wealth, for example, by robbery, but this is not a part of economic theory. The reason for this is not essentially that the individual may be discovered and so robbery may turn out to be against his interest after all; it is because robbery cannot be made to fit into a system for the acquisition of wealth for men in general.

The two systems have the further similarity that they may be regarded as concerned with a neutral or second-order value — something not ultimately worthwhile for its own sake, but a necessary means to what is worthwhile<sup>21</sup>. The economist states what rational man would do to maximize his wealth, but he leaves it open to the individual to use that wealth thereafter for good purposes or for bad. In the same way Hobbes advises what rational man would do to preserve his life. He could hardly go further than this in view of his assertion that otherwise men's values are diverse and subjective, there being no rule to be discovered from the objects themselves. But first it is necessary to survive and thereafter it is left to the individual to make of life what he can. As a system of morality, Hobbes's theory is based upon an abstraction and so deals only with a slice of life, but it is a very important slice.

---

<sup>21</sup> Hobbes appears to hold the view that to be a man is to have desires and therefore to want to survive. Suicide he regarded as a form of madness.



It is often said that since Machiavelli morals and politics have been separated. But as far as this statement implicates Hobbes, it would not appear to be true. The position is rather that there are two main kinds of theory relating to personal morals, and Hobbes's style of political system belongs to one of these but not to the other.

One tradition of moral theory, which we may call for convenience *motivational ethics*, is concerned mainly with the question of the motives from which actions are done and the moral worth of the agent. The other tradition, which we will call *utilitarian ethics*, is mainly concerned with the results of actions, its interest in motives being ultimately derivative from the results they produce. These two systems of ethics never meet, but one is a permanent criticism of the other<sup>22</sup>.

Hobbes's political system belongs to the utilitarian tradition. A determinist on the free-will issue, he was concerned with praise and blame for their results upon action, and not for any fundamental evaluation of the moral worth of the individual. Thus, for him, rebellion is a sin, but it is not a *new* sin for the successful rebel to govern. Both parts of this proposition are essentially attached to an ethic of results.

This morality of results in the political sphere, serves as a criticism of intuitionism. In ordinary personal ethics, for example, we should very often regard the so-called Machiavellian as one of the worst types of humanity; whereas in politics from the point of view of the morality of results, a statesman who in a cold and calculating way served the best interest of his state would not be by any means the most serious liability. A much more dangerous figure in politics is what we might call the desperate romantic, who is prepared to blow up himself, and take the rest of the world with him, and who, in private morality, may even get some sympathy<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, from the point of view of an ethic of results it is much more moral to start wars that you can win than it is to start wars that you cannot win. If states behave no worse than the position of being realistic about their own capacities, there does at least begin to arise the possibility of rationalising the power relationships in the world and thin ice begins to form over the uncertainty of international politics.

The problems of the modern world are so new and complex that our

---

<sup>22</sup> After David Hume's sceptical enquiry in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a valiant attempt was made to draw these two branches of ethics together by Kant whose theory, nevertheless, was a regrettable confusion of the issue. To note one aspect of this confusion, Kant tried to make the universalization principle in ethics a matter of logical consistency and contradiction. Here, Hobbes seems to have been on better ground — the universalization principle behind moral philosophy is of the form 'do as you would be done by'; it is not a logical principle.

<sup>23</sup> In fact one of the chief elements of stability in the postwar world has been the fact that Russia has behaved as though she would not start a war unless she thought she could win, and her statesmen have seemed sufficiently realistic in their estimates on this matter.



instinctive reactions to them, unaided, may well be considerably at fault. To take an example now from the economic field: it is instinctive for a family that falls upon poor times to think that it will improve its position by economising. In a similar way, western governments first met the great inter-war depression by restrictions of consumption. There are, however, few people today who would not condemn such a policy, and though they might argue about the details they would advocate an expansionist programme. Yet, even now, we still feel that there is something 'unnatural' about Keynesian solutions; this does not mean that they are not correct.

In addition to directing us to a careful examination of the results of actions, a Hobbesian model leads us to empty out of politics all we can. It recommends us to abandon or to find personal and non-political avenues to many objectives men hold to be fundamental. The great values which they regard as worthwhile for their own sake, whether in the field of politics, religion or artistic creation, turn out to be diverse, subjective and incompatible; and Hobbes recommends that they be subordinated to the second-order value of survival where they conflict with it. Historically, this has been the general response of thinking men in the period of fatigue following disastrous wars, and Hobbes has written it into a political theory. In a world divided as ours now is between communism and western democracy, not to mention many other forms of politics, morals and religion all regarded as axioms — if we are to avoid catastrophic solutions, we must attempt in some way Hobbes's quest for what concerns all men more or less equally<sup>24</sup>.

When it is asserted or denied that Hobbes's system is a system of morality, such statements by themselves are unintelligible. We must first ask 'Compared with what, is it a system of morality or not such a system?'. We tend to assume that we know a number of theories of morality bearing on the case, and that Hobbes's doctrine can be set alongside these. If this is so, Hobbes can be classified in a given field of re-

---

<sup>24</sup> International affairs are at present dominated by two main factors: the emergence of weapons of great destructive force, and a prodigious increase in world population. In this situation, we may easily reach the position that men of all creeds would be prepared to seek a private solution to 'ideological' problems if only the question of continued physical survival could be solved; and with the best will in the world they may be unable to work out how this can be done. (And in any case, there are certainly a large number of people in all countries who are more interested in what we will call the basic economic and political problem than they are in the nostrums of their political leaders). It is advisable, therefore, that we should find out all we can about the political conservation of men. The growth of large scale methods of destruction such as the atomic bomb has raised the conjecture that we may soon reach the position that the smallest states could be a fatal menace to the largest. In such an event, we shall have reached, between nations, the position that holds between Hobbes's natural men — a saturation of power or an equality of fear. On Hobbes's assumptions it would then be rational to form a world state, though whether men would in fact do this is, of course, another question.

ference. The truth of the matter more often, however, is that we very rarely think about the great moral problems of survival, peace and war. The mind boggles at these question, we have no applicable moral systems and fall back upon snap judgements.

I have tried to show that Hobbes put forward a rational system concerning the survival of men in general; that the essential character of such a system may easily be disguised by calling it a system of prudence or expediency. I have also tried to illustrate the importance of being able to think in this way. Leaving aside the question of whether Hobbes's theory is itself correct or adequate, and considering the style of that theory, one is led to the conclusion: if this is not a system of morality, what is morality? if this is not morality, it ought to be.

HOWARD WARRENDER